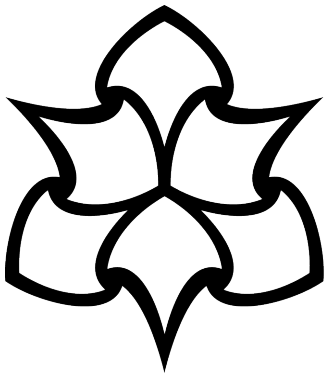

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Examining the Impact of Austerity on Community Sport Development Workers and Their Professional Environment

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, austerity measures in the UK have placed increasing emphasis on third sector organisations to address gaps in Central Government provision. Reflecting upon community sport services during this period, this paper presents the findings of a qualitative study of the everyday working practices of a group of community sport development workers (CSDWs) in the South of England, outlining how they adopted innovative and entrepreneurial practices as a response to fiscal constraint. We argue that, amidst an intensification of neoliberalism and new public management, the UK community sport development sector has become increasingly fragmented which, in turn, has presented a series of challenges that militate against the (re)establishment of community-based ideals. The paper concludes that there is potential to apply these findings globally to nations where austerity policies have been the primary response to the financial crisis and/or where a similar approach to community sport development exists.

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1. Introduction

The global financial crisis of 2008 persuaded a number of national governments to adopt economic austerity and introduce significant public sector reform (Parnell et al., 2017; Rossi & Jeanes, 2018). In the UK, austerity measures have increased the emphasis on third sector organisations to deliver high quality services and to 'plug the gaps' in Central Government provision, with the 'Big Society' initiative notable as an early attempt to overcome fiscal constraint (Morgan, 2013; Parnell et al., 2017). Such an approach is highly evident within community sport projects, in particular those where sport is used as a 'cross-cutting' tool to attend to a wealth of broader social concerns (Harris & Houlihan, 2014). However, with increased pressure on

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(sporting) organisations to compete for resources and demonstrate their value (Rossi & Jeanes, 2018), the fragility of this context has subsequently challenged managers within the sport sector to reflect upon and (re)consider their operational practices.

Within a marginal policy area such as sport (Coalter, 2015), where government understandings and interpretations of community sport development have varied over time, obtaining clarity and consistency for those delivering community sport initiatives at a grassroots level has proved problematic. While recent empirical work has sought to evidence the impact of austerity on the community sport sector (e.g. Parnell et al., 2019; Walker & Hayton, 2018), relatively little is known about the day-to-day repercussions of these circumstances on the practice of community sports development workers (CSDWs). In the absence of such discussion, this paper presents the findings of a small-scale qualitative study of the everyday working practices of a group of CSDWs in the South of England (n = 10). Placing participant 'voices' at the centre of the analysis, the paper provides insight into the impact of austerity and intensified neoliberal policy on the professional lives of CSDWs outlining, in particular, how respondents negotiated and adapted to the conditions and consequences of austerity in terms of their everyday workplace strategies and practices.

2. Austerity, Neoliberalism and Community Sport

The 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review implemented by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition government was the catalyst for a series of public spending cuts that have marked an 'era of austerity' in the UK (Walker & Hayton, 2018). Following the return of a Conservative government in 2015, a fresh Spending Review announced that further budgetary reduction would be implemented to create a scenario of 'super-austerity'[1] (Lowndes & Gardner, 2016; Parnell et al., 2017; Walker & Hayton, 2018).

Mirroring previous pecuniary measures, this new round of constraints served to compound the impact of earlier austerity policies creating unevenly spread and debilitating multiplier effects on public services, in particular at a local government level (Lowndes & Gardner, 2016). Consequently, for discretionary, or non-statutory, services such as sport and leisure, super-austerity presents a specific challenge and uncertainty around future modes of delivery and funding mechanisms (Collins & Haudenhuyse, 2015; Parnell et al., 2017). Furthermore, as Roberts (2017) notes, the impact of austerity often exhibits geographical variance, with capital cities or major metropolitan areas more likely to fare better. This reinforces Collins's (2010) view that reductions in public sector provision are likely to have the most negative impacts in regions where private sector organisations are less likely to fill the void left by an undermined public sector, leading to significant inequality.

Of course, as Rossi and Jeanes (2018) remind us, austerity is as much a political instrument as it is an economic measure to reign in public debt or provide financial stability. Certainly, critical commentary surrounding the 2008 global financial crisis (Clarke & Newman, 2012) (see also Lowndes & Gardner, 2016; Rossi & Jeanes, 2018) would indicate that austerity is more political, than economic, in its application. As such, it has been suggested that the implementation of austerity policies (in particular

in the Global West) has provided a convenient juncture through which to further extend the proliferation of neoliberal ideology that has dominated political and economic practice in recent decades (Andrews & Silk, 2018; Rossi & Jeanes, 2018). Indeed, literature suggests that rather than being a necessary response to the global economic crisis, the implementation of an austerity agenda in the UK was indicative of a neoliberal shock doctrine designed to contribute to the further destruction of public services, and further reduce the role of the state (Atkinson, 2015; Levitas, 2012).

While the relationship between neoliberalism and sport has been rehearsed elsewhere (see Andrews & Silk, 2011), it is worth re-visiting the key tenets in play. In sum, discourses of efficiency, accountability, consumerism, choice, self-interest and individual responsibility have become ingrained in policy rhetoric to replace a form of governance based upon a sense of collective responsibility (Dean, 2010; Morgan & Costas Batlle, 2019; Rossi & Jeanes, 2018). Accordingly, publicly-funded organisations (including those within the community sport sector) have regulated their practices to meet the demands of an expanded free market and a reduction in government responsibility for social needs (Apple, 2001). For Dean (2010, p. 197), the shift towards neoliberal metrics and a 'new public management' agenda act as 'technologies of performance' to regulate practice and transform professionals into 'calculating individuals' seeking the most efficient means possible to achieve predetermined targets. A focus on outcomes and target setting is just one example of the extent to which there has been an acceptance of governmentalisation, new public management, and neoliberal ideals within the sport sector (see, for example, Green, 2009; Grix, 2009, 2010; Grix & Phillpots, 2011; Lindsey, 2009).

Of course, as Andrews and Silk (2018) highlight, neoliberalism does not assert itself in a uniform or blanket manner. Indeed, neoliberalism is a concept that has proved difficult to define (Collier, 2012; Goldstein, 2012; Peck & Theodore, 2012; Wacquant, 2012), not least because of its divergences as a political or economic term (Peck & Theodore, 2012) or as a construct that is conceived as theoretically abstract or possessing an actual existence (Andrews & Silk, 2018; Collier, 2012; Goldstein, 2012). Following articulations which view neoliberalism as a profoundly political project (see Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Peck & Theodore, 2012; Wacquant, 2012), and possessing variegated intensities (Goldstein, 2012; Peck & Theodore, 2012), Andrews and Silk (2018) have described it in the plural, suggesting that a number of *neoliberalisms* exist which highlight the varied interactions between state, market and citizenship to leverage opportunities for those who possess economic capital and impose restrictions upon those who lack such capital (Peck & Theodore, 2012; Wacquant, 2012). For Wacquant (2012), this is indicative of an 'actually existing neoliberalism', which is uplifting and liberating for some populations or sectors, yet castigatory and restrictive for others.

Literature has documented how community sport development providers have become more calculating and agile in the manner in which they have negotiated the variegated intensities of an actually-existing neoliberalism (Andrews & Silk, 2018; Goldstein, 2012; Peck & Theodore, 2012), and developed strategies to compete for increasingly scarce resources that have been exacerbated by austerity (see, for

example, Morgan & Costas Batlle, 2019; Parnell et al., 2019; Walker & Hayton, 2018; Widdop et al., 2018). For Parnell et al. (2017), this poses a significant threat to the viability of organisations that are dependent on government funding for their survival. Furthermore, given that the impact of austerity is often intensely localised and place specific (Lowndes & Gardner, 2016; Roberts, 2017), local government services (especially non-statutory ones such as sport and leisure) may be subject to significant fragmentation and fragility. Such views concur with Klein's (2007) somewhat damning analysis of the impact of neoliberalism within public services, highlighting that when social activity is subject to market forces, communities have a tendency to cease looking out for one another and become more focused on their own self-interests.

There is a tragic irony here, particularly since the oft stated benefits and aims of community sport are situated within an ethos of public good and social cohesion. However, as Roberts (2017) remarks, the community sport development sector is no stranger to shifting political terrain and debilitating fiscal constraints and has demonstrated itself to be resilient to such challenges in the past through a continual cycle of evolution and adaptation. Indeed, as Lowndes and Gardner (2016, p. 370) observe, the optimist's view of austerity would suggest that it 'provides a golden opportunity … to build a new self-confidence (wrought out of hardship), champion local identities and acquire new powers'. Lowndes and Gardner go on to highlight how organisations with a history of resilience (such as community sport development organisations) have done so via processes of robustness through opportunism (Coalter, 2015; Roberts, 2017), to further exemplify the necessity for adaptability and agility in the face of shifting political circumstances (see also John, 2014).

3. Methods

The study adopted a longitudinal design in order to capture the impact of austerity measures over time and the data were collected in three phases between 2013-2016. Phase 1 comprised one-to-one, qualitative interviews with CSDWs; Phase 2, comprised one-to-one qualitative interviews with UK politicians and senior policy makers with a specific remit for sport; and Phase 3 involved data collection via an online discussion forum where CSDWs were encouraged to interact with each other about the lived experiences of their everyday worlds. Accordingly, a qualitative methodological approach was deployed which was necessarily grounded in a constructivist ontology and an interpretivist epistemology, thereby enabling an in-depth exploration of the behaviours, experiences and perceptions of respondents (Berger & Luckmann, 1991; Flick, 2014; Gergen, 2009). The overall aim of the study was not only to generate a rich description of participant interpretations of their experiences, but also to explore the meanings that they attached to these experiences (Bryman, 2015). In the interests of brevity, the data featured here draws solely on Phase 1 of the study, i.e., one-to-one qualitative interviews with CSDWs. To this end, findings seek to provide unique insight into the everyday working lives of CSDWs amidst the challenges of austerity.

3.1. Sample and Procedure

Non-probability sampling was utilised with participants purposively selected (Cresswell, 2009) to ensure they had practical experience of the community sport development sector, rather than simply a strategic and policy remit. Initially, contact details of a small number of CSDWs were obtained via personal networks, and thereafter snowball sampling was utilised in order to reach further respondents working within these environments (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). In total, 10 participants were interviewed, from departments and organisations including: local authority sport development ($n = 2$) national governing bodies (NGB) of sport ($n = 2$), community sport partnerships (CSP) ($n = 3$), and sporting social enterprises ($n = 3$).[2] All participants divulged that they had been active participants in sport as children (often to a high level) and their desire to share their positive experiences and love of sport with others was a key motivator for becoming involved in community sport development. In addition, all participants had a sports-related degree, and four of the 10 participants were qualified to Masters' level.

3.2. Data Collection

As noted, interviews were semi-structured in nature and explored participant experiences from their own personal perspective (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008). The questioning style during interview was open-ended and, where necessary, further probing took place to clarify participant responses (Bryman, 2015). The interview schedule itself followed a series of key themes and issues gleaned from the extant literature and related to: i) participant experience of working within a community-based setting; ii) participant insight into how they understood, interpreted and negotiated government policy, including the impact of austerity policies; and iii) participant perspectives on how the community sport development sector might evolve over the next five to 10 years. In turn, interview discussion explored a range of issues surrounding participant experiences of their profession and their role, as well as the perceived impact on the communities in which they worked. The study received ethical approval from the University of Gloucestershire and participants were provided with an information sheet and consent form before discussions began. As far as practicably possible, all data collection took place at locations convenient to the respondents themselves. Interviews lasted between 60-150 minutes and were recorded digitally and transcribed *verbatim*.

3.3. Data Analysis

Interview data was analysed in four stages, using a grounded theory approach involving open, axial and selective coding (Charmaz, 2006). Firstly, transcripts were read in full to gain an overview of the data. Secondly, each transcript was individually coded and indexed to capture the different aspects of participant experience. Thirdly, these experiences were clustered and inductively rationalized into a number of over-arching topics. The final stage of analysis involved the formal deductive organization of these topics into generic themes related to: i) the impact of austerity on the community

sport development sector in general; and ii) the impact of austerity on individual practice. The following analysis is structured around these themes.

4. Findings

4.1. The Impact of Austerity on the Community Sport Development Sector

All participants commented on the lack of joined-up thinking around sport policy at governmental level, highlighting how austerity policies, in particular those within youth services, were a retrograde step and one that had been (in their view) highly detrimental to community sport development. The reality of working within community sport development was best summarized by George, who had been involved with the sector for 15 years and was, by his own admission, becoming somewhat jaded about the volume and impact of policy change that he had experienced:

> A change in government [policy] hasn't just impacted on sport development, it's impacted across every service as we have to downsize, to be more 'efficient' to go through 'systems thinking'. That's the buzz word. We 'systems think' daily, because we have to.

This view was shared by Eddie, who worked for a local authority sport development unit in a neighbouring county. He pointed to the non-statutory status of sport services within local authority provision as particularly salient to the detrimental circumstances that were evident within the sector:

> We have to find more and more 'efficiency savings'. Makes me laugh. We can't even be honest about what this is. It's not efficiency savings, it's cuts to services. Teams are being downsized and because we're [sport development] not a mandatory service, we're vulnerable.

Without exception, respondents articulated the view that, as a result of austerity policies, sport per se was becoming an increasingly fragmented and territorial sector (Lowndes & Gardner, 2016; Roberts, 2017; Walker & Hayton, 2018). More specifically, there was a feeling that sporting organisations were increasingly unwilling to share information as they may be in competition for the same funding. Participants highlighted that invariably there were several sporting agencies competing for the same client base in each geographical location. This was identified as problematic in that it was often confusing for the wider community as to who was responsible for delivering sport services and opportunities (Baker et al., 2017; Harris & Houlihan, 2016). For example, National Governing Body employee Erica had observed differing practices across the UK, in particular in the delivery of sport-specific 'Whole Sport Plans' (WSPs)[3]:

> CSPs [County Sports Partnerships] are meant to help you deliver your 'Whole Sport Plan' locally; some are great, but some just want to do everything themselves and they don't particularly tell us what they're doing. There's no consistency …

Similar concerns around information sharing were raised by Joe, a local authority worker. He argued that inconsistency in communication practice had led to confusion and a sense of being ostracized from the main flow of important information:

> CSPs are not always good at sharing information. We really need to know what NGBs are doing. All of a sudden you hear that this NGB has received funding to do x and y and you think, 'Who brokered that?'

Further reflections on the increasingly fragmented and territorial nature of the community sport development sector were provided by Rob, who had been working with CSPs for eight years and who highlighted how they (and a number of other key sporting organisations) had changed:

> They are now much more strategic, and most operate as a business. They are in the market of keeping the money for themselves. It is no longer about who is best placed to meet this or that objective, it is a land grab …

A further factor that had intensified the fragmented and divisive nature of the sector was the propensity for funding to typically be targeted at specific community cohorts, such as people with a disability, black and minority ethnic (BME) groups, females, or those deemed 'at-risk' of engagement with crime and anti-social behaviour. Echoing Philpots et al. (2011), the complexity of having to serve the needs of community and partner organisations, whilst also having to achieve nationally defined service level agreement targets and key performance indicators as a condition of funding was a common reflection. For example, Gary highlighted that while community sport development organisations were characteristically required to align with the focus of national policy and strategy, in his experience they often operated within a local political realm which was at odds with these policies and the overriding ideology. This sentiment was shared by other CSDWs who explained that at times they experienced demand from community members for sporting activities that were not always available as a consequence of the fact that they were not a specified target group. When reflecting upon her own strategic priorities, Ann, who worked for a CSP, indicated that these were often at odds with the actual needs of her local community:

> We've had so many ideas from different governments over the years … obesity is always on the agenda but what actually is being done? Then it was competitive sport that was the focus, but if you go into communities, sometimes the reason they've dropped out of sport is because they don't like competitive, structured sport, yet we're being forced to concentrate on that by the government …

Without exception, this 'target group' approach was seen by respondents as detrimental to community sport development, and ecentrali a deficit model, which was perceived as unhelpful, isolating and demotivating for some community members. Indeed, as Gary pointed out:

> … funding is divisive. [For example,] It doesn't cater for intergenerational activities. Instead of bringing the community together, it sections parts of the community as worthy of receiving funding, implying that other areas are okay, and don't need activities. That's not helpful for me, when I am up against having to have a certain percentage BME/disabled at my sessions. The simple fact is they may not want to do sport! But I may have others in that community who want to try sport, but I can't offer it to them because they're not the focus of the funding.

Sharing similar sentiments, Julie, who worked for a social enterprise that focused on deprived communities, voiced frustration at not being able to offer 'what the community actually wanted', feeling compelled instead to align her local offer with

national funding streams. More specifically, Julie noted how she had been proactive in requesting sporting services in her local community but, because they were not designated to a 'target group', funding was proving difficult to obtain. However, Julie was not alone in her frustrations. Speaking about her experiences in a similarly deprived community, Amy echoed this view:

> When it comes to sport a lot of issues come down to funding: which way's the wind blowing now, and where the money is being targeted. I wonder if we have lost sight of what sports development really is, and instead we're just trying to tag on to everyone's agenda …

Mirroring the mantra of 'new public management' and the rhetoric of neoliberal ideology (Dean, 2010), several respondents noted that funding was often tied to specific, short-term timescales and the achievement of pre-determined outcome targets. This was also seen as problematic and further served to alienate and frustrate certain community groups. Joe, a Local Authority employee observed:

> … communities need consistency, which is something they may not get in the rest of their lives. They become wise to people going in with an agenda, they know they're not gonna be around long term, so they think, here we go again … That makes it difficult to get commitment from them.

Similarly, Gary reflected:

> Developing community sport is time consuming. You need to get to know people, gain their trust. Not be seen as a fly-by-night who comes in, earning in their eyes, a king's ransom, only in it for yourself, and off you go again, leaving them in the same situation. That's why community sport is in a mess, there's no true understanding of how to best work with communities, and we're not given long enough to do it.

The most striking concession on the impact of austerity on the community sport development sector was offered by Clive, who worked for a small district authority. He articulated a somewhat pessimistic perspective on the security of his own role and that of local authority sports development commenting that, 'I doubt very much that Local Authority sports development will be around for much longer. Give it 10–15 years and we'll all be gone and it will be outsourced'.

These remarks align with wider commentary that has documented how austerity has led to the increased outsourcing of sport and physical education services in the UK (Griggs, 2010; Parnell et al., 2017). Moreover, such testimonies highlight a shift in focus within the community sport development sector away from ecentraliz management and towards a more competitive, ecentralized environment where the role and remit of local authority sport services have transferred from acting as a 'provider' to that of 'facilitator' (King, 2014). In addition, such findings indicate that CSDWs are required, more than ever, to adopt what King (2014) has described as an 'adapt to survive' strategy. Indeed, it is towards these adaptations and individual practices, that we now turn.

4.2. 'Adapting to Survive' – Individual Responses to Austerity

Respondents provided a wealth of insight into how, at a strategic level, they had learnt to adapt their sport development practices in the face of austerity policies. In

several cases, participants documented how the challenges associated with funding being 'ring-fenced' towards certain target groups, alongside the necessity to meet specified targets in order to receive funding, demonstrated the coercive power of the state in relation to the perceived autonomy of individual agency. As such, some individuals expressed how they had prioritised their work towards certain groups where funding was more accessible, thus willingly complying with Government policy and act as a covert corroborator of austerity and wider neoliberal logic (Andrews & Silk, 2018). Amy was one such individual:

> It almost feels like [some] programmes are being run by politicians not sports development officers; they don't quite understand how things do and don't work in a community setting. They just think it sounds like a brilliant idea, let's give you loads of money, let's make you do it, regardless of whether it's the right thing for the community or not …

Maria, who worked for an national governing body of sport, raised similar concerns about the way in which her work was increasingly being driven by the target groups for which she was able to access funding. While relatively inexperienced in the sector, having only worked in community sport for two years, Maria conceded that she felt complicit in creating a structure and culture that did not always translate into what her communities demanded, but that this was a conscious adaptive strategy to enable longevity in her role:

> …. we had so many enquiries coming in saying: 'I want to do something with 12 years and under groups', and likewise, older people. But we weren't given any funding for those groups. They're not a priority …

A fear around losing one's job came through in several respondent interviews, and this fear was clearly very real for those who felt vulnerable in the face of cuts and changes to delivery mechanisms. As Parnell et al. (2017) notes, the community sport sector is pessimistic about how it might accommodate austerity measures. However, findings from this research indicated how creating conditions of fear were a means by which the 'ruling elite' could exert control over the workforce (Gramsci, 1971; Klein, 2007) and encourage compliance and acceptance with a system that, in this case, CSDWs felt poorly conceptualised and did not necessarily agree with, yet often felt powerless to act against (Andrews & Silk, 2018).

That said, evidence emerged which suggested how CSDWs used their knowledge and experience of both the community sport sector and the political environment to inform their professional practice and identify means to circumvent the sole focus on meeting narrow, pre-ordained targets (Morgan & Costas Batlle, 2019). A prime example was Wendy, who had worked in a local authority setting for over 20 years and had a robust understanding of the political influences on her day to day work. Wendy explained how she was able to write reports and funding bids in a manner that aligned with policy agendas due to her wider knowledge of the political system. This she termed 'playing the game', discussing how during her time working within sports development she viewed her role as: 'part magician, part second-hand car salesperson and part 'Mystic Meg' visionary, to stay ahead of the game on all levels'.

Being able to 'play the game' demonstrates a degree of individual agency, a way in which through her knowledge of the political system Wendy was able to ensure that

sport, as a non-statutory service, retained its funding. During further discussion, she highlighted how, in her local authority role, she always had to remain, in her words, 'innovative in the face of change':

> At a local level it's not always the same politics as the national level. To then base sports development alongside that, it's got to fit both local and national agendas and that takes creativity. So, when you're delivering on the ground you need to be aware of the politics and you need to work with it. And that can be different to what the community wants.

Other CSDWs, such as Julie, were also finding ways to be more innovative and creative in their everyday practices in order to negotiate the conditions and consequences of austerity:

> [In my community] they want activities for the elderly but that's not on SE's [Sport England's] agenda so I have to look around for other funding, may be a more local funding pot for example, get a bit creative.

On the surface, it would appear that the necessity to be innovative and/or creative is evidence of individuals exercising a sense of agency by way of their responses to diversified funding models and policy initiatives. However, deeper analysis suggests that these examples only serve to further highlight where compliance with a neoliberal agenda has been extended through austerity. For example, the current UK Government policy for sport, *Sporting Future* (HM Government, 2015), actively encourages private sector input and emphasises neoliberal ideals of competition and market forces. More specifically, the policy urges responsive sporting organisations to react to the increased diversification of funding and the increasing commodification of community sport through 'philanthropy and fundraising, crowdfunding, social impact bonds or partnerships with the private sector that have yet to be fully utilised' (HM Government, 2015, p. 53).

Respondent accounts were replete with examples of how this current policy rhetoric was influencing their mind-set and everyday working practices. This consumer-focused, new managerialist approach was met with enthusiasm by some, most notably James, who was highly positive about how policy rhetoric was encouraging sport development personnel to act more in parallel with business principles. He discussed how sport had traditionally been a bit 'jumpers for goalposts' and needed to 'get with the times' if it was to survive. He was damning of the 'old-fashioned' Sports Development Officers who in his opinion:

> Just do the same old all the time, nothing innovative, nothing vaguely interesting and they expect people to rock up to that?! We really do need to get more entrepreneurial in sport. Society is moving on and in sports development we're not.

In a similar vein, Isaac, who had recently graduated from a sports coaching degree and been employed by the social enterprise where he completed his placement, was equally positive about the future of community sport needing to be altogether more entrepreneurial:

> I think this government has got it right. You have to have that flair to work in sport and it is encouraging people to set up their own businesses. It's not easy, but then nothing worthwhile ever is.

Other respondents, in particular those who had left local authority supported sports development to operate within social enterprises, observed how a more

commodified community sport development sector was opening up opportunities that were proving beneficial both at an individual and community level. Eric, for example, had established a sporting social enterprise which now delivered several sports programmes targeting specific groups. He admitted that setting up the venture had been difficult, but that the termination of the local authority sport development department shortly after he established the social enterprise had brought with it a series of opportunities:

> Local authority sport services being cut has created opportunities for us as a social enterprise. In this area the local sports development team was axed, some charities that relied on certain funding streams that dried up went under and there was a gap in the market. The local authority didn't want to know us when we first set up, but now it's very different.

For Eric, and like-minded organisations who aligned with the neoliberal ideals of a commodified sector, the shift to diversified funding had been beneficial and created new funding streams to explore. Julie, who worked for a neighbouring sport-based social enterprise (indeed, a competitor of Eric's) highlighted how cuts to local authority budgets had enabled her organisation to become an 'out-sourced' partner and fill the void created by a reduced workforce in the sport development unit:

> All of the local authority sport development people in this area have gone. [A neighbouring sport development unit] used to have 60 people working in their sport development unit, that's been reduced to five. On one hand they're being told to meet all these targets and then on the other hand they're taking all of the sport development workforce out of the equation!

Julie went on to discuss how the local authority that she worked with was keen to utilise her social enterprise and work in partnership in order to meet their targets; targets that they would otherwise have struggled to meet due to their reduced workforce. Again, the impact of austerity is evident in this narrative, not least through the reduction of local authority provision, but also in how the same local authorities were being encouraged to work in partnership with more entrepreneurial organisations (such as social enterprises) and thus fulfil the rhetoric of initiatives such as the Big Society, which was introduced as an early 'counter-solution' to austerity (Collins & Haudenhuyse, 2015; Morgan, 2013). Furthermore, these narratives document how community sport development work is infused with neoliberal doctrine, whereby short-term, outcome-focussed approaches prevail in a context where organisational survival is at the behest of market solutions, and where the agency to employ strategies that enable deep-rooted community development is compromised (Thorpe & Rinehart, 2013).

5. Discussion

With austerity policies in the UK having been in place for approximately a decade, some emerging empirical work has sought to evidence their impact on community sport development practice. Where such studies do exist, focus is typically placed upon macro-level analyses of austerity (see Collins & Haudenhuyse, 2015; Roberts, 2017; Widdop et al., 2018), with only a small number of studies offering insight into

the actual day-to-day impact of austerity at the delivery level (e.g. Parnell et al., 2019; Walker & Hayton, 2018). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to add to this emerging literature and present insights from community sport development workers (CSDWs) who have managed community sport programmes through the turbulence of changing political priorities and the fiscal constraints of the recent period. To this end, the data on display offers a contemporary view of austerity from the 'bottom-up'.

Building upon the wider literature which has noted how the community sport sector has become more territorial and fragmented in nature since the introduction of austerity (Walker & Hayton, 2018), these findings reveal how community sport development work has continued unabated as an adaptable, resilient provider, finding novel means to re-invent the management and delivery of sport and leisure services (King, 2014; Roberts, 2017). Importantly, and despite on-going uncertainty related to leisure service provision and the fragility of sport development employment, findings indicate that where CSDWs have a detailed knowledge of the political landscape and are pro-active in engaging with the rhetoric of political decisions, the ability to be innovative is heightened and this may unlock opportunities to enhance organisational survival, or even flourish, within periods of austerity (Roberts, 2017). However, the findings also indicate how CSDWs have followed other sectors of the global sport industry in acting as 'covert corroborators of neoliberalism's privatizing, marketizing, and individualizing logics' (Andrews & Silk, 2018, p. 527). More specifically, the data provides examples of where CSDWs have become disaffected with the variegated intensity of actually existing neoliberalism yet continue to plug away undiminished (Andrews & Silk, 2018).

While our findings are specific to the south of England, they do provide evidence of how a decade of austerity has impacted front-line community sport development work, and an indication of how the global financial crisis of 2008 presented a convenient and opportune juncture to extend the imperceptible influence of neoliberalism (Andrews & Silk, 2018) through an austerity agenda. As such, there is potential to scale these findings globally and compare them to states or nations where austerity policies have been the primary response to the financial crisis and/or where a similar approach to community sport development exists. As Nicholson et al. (2011) observe, the centralized sport delivery structure evident in England enables national governments to exert significant influence through policy and funding mechanisms on the delivery of community sport programmes. This has been evident in the findings of this paper and is therefore salient to other nations who enact a centralized structure within their community sport development approach. Moreover, in liberal welfare regimes (Esping-Andersen, 1990), where neoliberal economic values and a willingness to commodify sport are more prominent (Nicholson et al., 2011), the findings of this paper are equally applicable.

While the limitations of using small-scale research projects that employ qualitative methods and draw upon self-selecting groups of research participants to understand sport management issues are well documented (see Koenigstorfer & Wemmer, 2019; Veal & Darcy, 2014), the insights offered here hold clear potential to inform management practice in relation to community sport programmes. Notwithstanding these

limitations, it is suggested that these findings have implications for others working in the community sport sector both in terms of policy and practice. Firstly, CSDWs should be encouraged to think more laterally in terms of how they negotiate the repercussions of neoliberal policy especially in relation to the anticipation of such circumstances and the co-production of service provision with community groups. This may mean the creation of a more open dialogue with these groups about the consequences of financial constraint and the establishment of safe spaces for solution-focused conversations around, for example, supply and demand. In turn, the community sport sector should be encouraged to establish training and development concerning the likely nuances of financial constraint within specific geographical contexts and communities and how strategies of adaptation might be developed and implemented. In addition, further research should be carried out on the role of CSDWs within different geographical contexts in order to assess their potential to make a more strategic contribution to community development. Of particular interest in this paper has been the individual struggles of CSDWs around the adaptation of working practice and corresponding research could explore how, at both the individual and collective level, CSDWs might not simply survive but flourish amidst shifting Government priorities related to sport.

Notes

1. 'Super-austerity' refers to a situation where new spending cuts follow a previous cycle of similar financial constraints (Lowndes & Gardner, 2016).
2. Pseudonyms are used for all participants.
3. 'Whole Sport Plans' were a requirement from Sport England that outlined how a sport (National Governing Body) would contribute to the delivery of Sport England's objectives, especially in relation to increased participation. They were a requirement of each sport that wished to receive public funding (Collins, 2010).

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